

Fact Sheet: Melanoma of the Skin

What is Melanoma?

Melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer. Melanoma is a malignant tumor that originates in **melanocytes**, the cells that produce the pigment melanin that gives skin its natural color and is heavily concentrated in most moles. Melanomas fall into the following four basic categories: superficial spreading melanoma; lentigo maligna; acral lentiginous melanoma; and nodular melanoma.

The Burden of Melanoma

The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2002, approximately 53,600 persons will be diagnosed with malignant melanoma.¹ Since 1981, the incidence of melanoma in the United States has increased an average of 7 percent per year to a rate of 14.3 per 100,000 in 1997. In Vermont, the age-adjusted incidence of melanoma during 1994-1996 was 14.6 per 100,000 population (95% CI: 12.9, 16.4). Melanoma is the most common cancer among people 25 to 29 years old. From 1994-1996, the age-adjusted incidence of melanoma was higher in Vermont males than Vermont females (18.0 per 100,000 vs. 12.1 per 100,000, respectively).

Malignant melanoma is the most rapidly increasing form of cancer in the U.S., causing more than 75% of all deaths from skin cancer.² From 1995-1999, the age-adjusted mortality rate for melanoma in Vermont was 3.2 per 100,000 (95% CI: 2.6, 3.9) compared to 3.0 per 100,000 in the U.S.³ The mortality rate for melanoma was slightly higher in both Vermont men (4.6 per 100,000) and women (2.1 per 100,000) compared to the U.S. mortality rates for each gender (U.S. male: 4.3 per 100,000; U.S. female: 2.0 per 100,000).³

What are the signs and symptoms?

There are key warning signs of melanoma to be aware of including irregularities in shape, edges, color, and size. The majority of melanomas are black or brown. However, melanomas occasionally stop producing pigment. When that happens, the melanomas may no longer be dark, but are skin-colored, pink, red, or purple. The ABCD's of melanoma are as follows: Asymmetry, Border irregularity, Color variability, and Diameter larger than a pencil eraser.

Who is at Risk?

At this time, the causes of melanoma are not fully understood. Researchers have found certain risk factors that are more common in people who develop melanoma than in people who do not get the disease. The following are some of the factors associated with an increased risk of developing this disease.⁴

- Family history of melanoma
- Dysplastic nevi
- History of melanoma
- Weakened immune system
- Many ordinary moles (more than 50)

- Ultraviolet (UV) radiation
- Severe, blistering sunburns
- Fair skin

Prevention of Melanoma

Exposure to the sun's UV rays appears to be the most important factor in developing skin cancer. Thus, skin cancer is a largely preventable disease when sun protective practices and behaviors are consistently used. According to the 2001 Vermont Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS), preliminary data show that among Vermont adults aged 18 years and older, 36.6% of men and 60% of women routinely used sunblock with an SPF ≥ 15 ; 39.7% of men and 48.9% of women stayed in the shade when out on a sunny day; and 52.5% of men and 42.2% of women wore protective clothing when exposed to sunlight. These results emphasize the need to educate Vermonters to practice sun safety to establish healthy behavior patterns that can reduce a person's risk of developing melanoma.

Healthy Vermonters 2010

Preventing skin cancer is a priority in Healthy Vermonters 2010, the states blueprint for improving public health. The Healthy Vermonters 2010 goal for skin cancer is to increase to at least 75% the percentage of people who use at least one protective measure to decrease their risk of skin cancer (as measured by percentage of adults 18+).

How is Melanoma Diagnosed?

The most accurate diagnostic test is a biopsy. If a pathology report detects melanoma, the melanoma is ranked according to stages based on the size and depth of the melanoma, whether it's ulcerated, and whether metastasis has occurred.

What are Treatment Options for Melanoma?

- Standard treatment for this disease is surgery to remove a melanoma;
- For metastatic melanoma, adjuvant therapy may be used;
- Clinical trials

Information Resources for Melanoma

For more information, contact the following organizations:

- National Cancer Institute: 1-800-4-CANCER or <http://cancer.gov>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/ChooseYourCover/
- The Skin Cancer Foundation: <http://www.skincancer.org/>

References

1. *Cancer Facts and Figures 2002*, American Cancer Society, 2002.
2. *MMWR Weekly*, May 11, 2001. 50(18); 365.
3. *1995-1999 Vermont Vital Records*. The U.S. rates are based on

the Vital Statistical System of the United States Public Use Database.
U.S. rates are 1995-1999 white population mortality rates. All rates
are age-adjusted to the 2000 U.S. standard population.
4. National Cancer Institute: 1-800-4-CANCER or
<http://cancer.gov>